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SUBJECT: TENSIONS REMAIN HIGH IN ORISSA FOLLOWING CHRISTMAS VIOLENCE

REF: KOLKATA 385

¶1. Summary: (SBU) Tensions prevailed in the curfew bound tribal-dominated Kandhamal and Phulbani districts of the Eastern India state of Orissa following violence which began on December 24. At least, one person has been killed and several have been reported injured during the violence. Property damage to churches, businesses and homes has also been reported. Backed by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), on December 25, the local Kui tribal community called for a general 36-hour shutdown in the area and blocked the roads to enforce it. The Kui tribe considers the region their native land and is accusing others born in the region who have converted to Christianity (so-called Dalit Christians) of exploiting the reservations in government jobs meant only for Schedule Tribe and Schedule Castes. Moreover, Working President of VHP's Orissa Unit, Dr. Umesh Patri and President of the All India Christian Council, Orissa Chapter, Reverend P. R. Parichha also believe that the government's non-responsiveness to demand from Christians and Muslims for reservations in government jobs for their own minority communities is also a reason for resentment among the communities. As opposed to Parichha's concern, however, Patri sounded confident that Orissa violence will not escalate in violence reminiscent of Gujarat. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) Tensions remained high in the curfew bound tribal-dominated Kandhamal and Phulbani districts of Orissa where a dozen churches and convents were attacked and set afire on December 25. These attacks followed a December 24 assault on Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader Laxamanananda Saraswati who was leading an anti-conversion drive in the area. One person was killed and several were injured during the violence (reftel). Sources in Orissa police said that the trouble started in the morning of December 24 in the Christian-majority Brahmanigaon village, 150 kilometers South of Phulbani, over Christmas celebrations. While the Christian community wanted to celebrate the day in a grand way, the Hindus opposed the plan. This led initially to clashes between the Hindu and Christian groups. Following the attack on Saraswati by a group of people allegedly belonging to the Christian community, the violence escalated. Curfews continue to remain in force in towns such as Brahmanigaon, Baliguda, Daringibadi and district headquarter town of Phulbani.

¶3. (SBU) Backed by the VHP, the local Kui tribal community also called for a general shutdown in the area and since the morning of December 25 have blocked roads in the district to enforce the 36-hour-strike and to highlight their various demands. Kui tribe considers the region to be their native land. The Kui tribe also rejects the claims of being a native of anyone who has converted to Christianity or even Hinduism. In particular, the Kui tribe accuses those who have converted -- so-called Dalit Christians -- of exploiting the reservations in government jobs meant only for Schedule Tribe and Schedule Castes by birth. Orissa police report that they are finding it difficult to

access violence-hit areas as protestors have obstructed roads by felling trees.

14. (SBU) The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-backed ruling Biju Janata Dal government in Orissa held two rounds of meetings on December 26 with senior officials to review the situation. Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik later informed media that adequate forces had been deployed in Kandhamal district and that the situation was "under control". Patnaik who has already deputed two senior state government officials to the region also informed media that as many as 27 platoons of policemen had been deployed in Kandhamal and three companies of Central Reserve Police Force personnel were on their way to the towns of Rourkela, Sambalpur and Rayagada.

15. (SBU) Working President of VHP's Orissa Unit, Dr. Umesh Patri believes that the recent violence arose due to broader issues about reservations for government jobs. He informed Post that currently there are no provisions for reservations along religious lines. Currently, the reservations are only to be provided to those who are born Schedule Caste or Schedule Tribe. Patri stated that, among the Christian population in Kandhamal and Phulbani districts, about 80 per cent were of tribe population which have now converted to Christianity by choice and are claiming the right to the Schedule Caste-reserved jobs in the face of strong objection from the non-converted tribesmen. President of the All India Christian Council of Orissa Chapter, Rev. P. R. Parichha stated that the government's non-responsiveness to demand from Christians and Muslims for new reservations in government jobs for their own minority communities is also a reason for the simmering resentment among the communities. Parichha added that the Christian community leaders will soon seek audience with the Chief Minister for his immediate intervention to protect the Christian community.

16. (SBU) Comment: As opposed to Rev. Parichha's concerns, Umesh KOLKATA 00000388 002 OF 002

Patri of the VHP sounded confident that Orissa violence will not take an uglier turn and that a Gujarat-like situation will not arise. Both agreed, however, that to resolve the simmering conflict, the government must address the issue of reservations for minority communities. The state of Orissa has been communally sensitive since the killing of Australian Missionary Graham Staines and his two sons in 1999, but generally the regional authorities have been non-responsive to religious issue matters. Rev. Parichha added that the BJP-backed Biju Janata Dal government in the state needs to work more on religious sensitivities and the Chief Minister must find time to give audience to the minority community in the state. End Comment. MILLER